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Cooking : mixing and measuring with young children

Abstract

Cooking with young children is a rewarding experience as an educator. Not only are the children enjoying themselves, but you are too. Cooking allows children to be in touch with their senses, and is a hands-on approach to learning. Of course cooking can be messy, which is what young children love most. Incorporating science, math, literacy, and social studies into one activity is easily done through cooking.

Whether you are a novice or a veteran when it comes to cooking, the skills children gain are immense when you incorporate cooking into the early childhood curriculum. I believe there are some important aspects to cooking that are beneficial, but above all, keeping children healthy and safe is one of the most crucial. This article describes cooking with young children, primarily infants and toddlers, and includes some of my own reflections.

COOKING: MIXING AND MEASURING WITH YOUNG CHILDREN

A Graduate Journal Article

Submitted to the

Department of Curriculum and Instruction

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Education

UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA

by

Aimee Marie Klostermann

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ABSTRACT

Cooking with young children is a rewarding experience as an educator. Not only are the children enjoying themselves, but you are too. Cooking allows children to be in touch with their senses, and is a hands-on approach to learning. Of course cooking can be messy, which is what young children love most. Incorporating science, math, literacy, and social studies into one activity is easily done through cooking. Whether you are a novice or a veteran when it comes to cooking, the skills children gain are immense when you incorporate cooking into the early childhood curriculum. I believe there are some important aspects to cooking that are beneficial, but above all, keeping children healthy and safe is one of the most crucial. This article describes cooking with young children, primarily infants and toddlers, and includes some of my own reflections.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Cooking with young children can be meaningful and pleasurable. Children in an early childhood classroom can learn about math, literacy, and science in one place. Of course, cooking is a social activity that is *hands on* and rich in sensory experience. Cooking can be simple or complex depending on the activity. Educators have an important role to fulfill and cooking could be something easily integrated into the curriculum. “The untrained adult tends to focus on getting a cooking project completed successfully rather than on helping children learn” (Kamii & DeVries, 1993, p. 279). I enjoy cooking with young children, and I hope to encourage other educators that cooking, with some organization, is something which can be an enjoyable learning experience.

Description of Topic

Cooking is science for it can stimulate children’s scientific reasoning (DeVries, Zan, Hildebrant, Edmiaston, & Sales, 2002, p. 121). This activity can start at a very young age in a childcare setting. Even infants can cook! This article describes how cooking incorporates math, science, and literacy, health and safety, and culture. Part of a classroom’s curriculum can involve cooking. “Cooking is not always about eating the final product; it is about preparing the ingredients, feeling the batter’s texture, smelling the baking” (Schenkelberg, 2003, p. 94). This is one of the reasons I enjoy cooking with young children.

Rationale

Why should young children cook? The answer is because young children can learn much from cooking experiences. Children develop their fine and large motor skills, learn about nutritional development, explore their senses, and examine science, math, and literacy

in an integrated way. Young children are capable of cooking with a teacher facilitating their activities. Cooking enhances children's fine motor skills and eye-hand coordination as well as providing a rich sensory experience (Dombro, Colker, & Dodge, 1997). Not all early childhood educators believe that cooking is appropriate, and the constructivist classroom is not the only place where cooking can occur. "Although food and nutrition are important components of early childhood science curriculum, early childhood educators do not generally consider cooking itself as part of the science program" (DeVries et al., 2002, p. 121). Cooking should be done by children and not just by adults, for cooking in the classroom can open up a wide realm of learning possibilities for young children.

Purpose of Article

This article was written to be a guide for cooking with children ages 0-3. Infants and toddlers are constantly surrounded by the preparation and tasting of food so it would naturally follow that young children should be involved in the cooking experiences (Dombro et al., 1997). For teachers, cooking can provide a wealth of learning experiences with some organization and knowledge about nutrition, food safety, and food allergies. It is also realistic to incorporate different cultures and help children learn about each other. For example, I will provide easy and informative ways to cook with different age groups 0-3 years old. Also, this article is designed to build confidence in educators who are uneasy about cooking with young children.

Importance of Article

By encouraging other teachers in the field to cook with young children in their classrooms, I want teachers to be comfortable doing these activities with very young children. Cooking in a group setting can be beneficial in many ways, but precautions have to

be taken, especially if allergies are involved. Cooking is something that can be accomplished in a group setting and is easily integrated with other areas of development. Children in the infant and toddler years may not have an understanding of number, but math can be used. Cooking can serve to incorporate math (Geist, 2001). Cooking is not always going to be complicated either. Children can help wash vegetables or spread butter on toast (Taylor & Todd, 1999). Even though cooking should be included in early childhood classrooms, children with food allergies should not be exempt from cooking. "In addition to training, make sure teachers review information on children's medical release forms about food allergies" (Cohen, 2008, p. 62). It is possible to include all of the children in this enjoyable learning experience.

Terminology

Anaphylaxis: a hypersensitivity (as to foreign proteins or drugs) resulting in sensitization following prior contact with the causative agent.

Constructivist Education: "...takes its name from Piaget's research showing that children actively interpret their experiences in the physical and social worlds and thus construct their own knowledge, intelligence, and mortality" (DeVries et al., 2002, p. 35).

Cooking: general food preparation some of which may not require heat.

CHAPTER 2

Methodology

Method to Write and Submit Article

I chose to write about cooking because it interests me and I wanted to explore cooking with young children. I could not find very much information on this topic when I searched published literature, which is why I decided to write a journal article. The information I have to share could be valuable to other early childhood educators. I enjoy cooking with children in my care and to know I can use my knowledge to benefit others. Children feel empowered as they cook. It never fails to surprise me how independent young children feel about making their own toast or pouring water in their oatmeal that reveals itself in a new sense of autonomy.

I find inspiration through an organization, the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and their publication, *Young Children*. I also am inspired by the National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers (NCCCC). They have a publication called, *The Voice*, where I am interested in submitting my article.

When I first started this process, I wanted to write about infants and reading. I thought I wanted to do this because I was working in the infant room and my own daughter was very interested in books. I was amazed that these babies were reading and pointing to pictures and wanting to learn more. I had a hard time finding information about babies and reading, which is why I wanted to write an article. As I was looking through submission guidelines for *Young Children* and *The Voice*, I discovered that science seemed to be of interest, and I wanted to learn more how young children can be scientists. I thought about cooking and how much I enjoy doing this activity with young children, and how it fits into

the early childhood curriculum. I was also hoping to gain more insight into cooking and how I could learn more. Ultimately, I am deciding to submit my article to *The Voice*.

Submission Guidelines

After discovering through a colleague that *The Voice* was looking for articles, I reviewed the guidelines on their website to find out more information (see Appendix A). The length, formatting requirements, expectations, and deadlines were all listed. It was helpful to know those guidelines before writing the article I desired on cooking.

Approval from Advisor

I have been talking to my advisor throughout the whole process. We continue to meet in person to discuss progress and to talk about any questions that arise. He calls and keeps me on track and is very good at checking with me. He is encouraging and patient.

Gather Data

My first step in gathering data was to search for articles on children ages 0-3. I have found some data, but not a lot. I think the information I am finding on preschool is still pertinent and can be used for my purposes. The following terms were surveyed to determine what articles had appeared in print: children 0-3, cooking, food allergies, science, math, and literacy related to cooking, and even some information on different cultures. As I gather data, I try to be consistent in my findings. Some of the key terms I searched were the following: cooking and science, cooking and math, cooking and language, early childhood cooking, and food allergies.

Writing Process

As I began to think about my topic, cooking, I developed a working outline. This outline has been very helpful as it keeps me focused, especially as I am doing research. The

items in my outline were the most important aspects of cooking I wanted to cover. With the help of my colleagues, I developed questions I wanted answered to keep me focused. Again, I have referred to these questions numerous times as I have started writing to keep me on topic. As I anticipate writing the actual article, I am keeping the submission guidelines close so I can refer to those and be familiar with them as I start writing the journal article.

During the writing process it was important to include other people to read and review my work. Another classmate was instrumental in keeping me focused. This person helped me develop questions that I wanted answered in my work as well as an outline that I could use to keep me on track.

Method to Discriminate what was Included/Eliminated

During my review of the literature, I tried to focus on instructional practices that exemplified constructivist education. Much of what I found did revolve around that theory. Most of the information I found was for older children in preschool, not infants and toddlers. I did find some information about infants and toddlers, which was helpful. I tried to find as much information as I could if it had anything to do with those age groups. I determined that the information I found that dealt with preschoolers was still beneficial and could still be used. In my search, I found information in journals and books. Both were acceptable, some more than others. Articles which did not have much substance were eliminated. These eliminated articles tended to be short snippets about cooking that did not give me anything new or valuable.

CHAPTER 3

The Article

Introduction

When I first started to think about cooking in the toddler classroom some years ago, I thought it was a special activity to do occasionally. Then I realized how capable my toddlers were and they could do much more than I was allowing them. I started to pay more attention to what infants were doing as well as the toddlers when it came time to cook. Cooking can be an important part in the early childhood curriculum and can affect many areas of development. As children participate in cooking experiences, they have the possibility of learning about science, math, literacy, and social studies. They also learn about being healthy. Potentially they can learn about other cultures through cooking. Learning takes place for children in a fun and exciting way by exploring with their senses and socializing with their peers.

Infants and toddlers can easily fit into a chef's hat and cook to their heart's content. This article covers in more detail what children can learn from cooking and how it can be done. Cooking will appear differently in an infant classroom than it does in a toddler classroom, but it is still cooking. As children gain more experience, they will surprise you with what they can do.

Cooking will be messy! That is the best part of all. Although it is important for cooking to be supervised and facilitated, children should be allowed to do these activities with some independence. Adults tend to focus on successfully completing a cooking activity rather than helping the children learn (Kamii & DeVries, 1993). Sometimes the focus need not be about the finished product in look or taste.

Science and Cooking

Cooking is science. “Cooks are like scientists in that they must observe, relate, and interpret evidence as they work” (Boals, 1992, p.19). Although babies and young children are not conscious of the way actual scientists think, observe, and reason, they are doing just that (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999). “They consider evidence, draw conclusions, do experiments, solve problems, and search for the truth” (Gopnik et al., 1999, p. 13). Cooking allows children to do all of these things.

A delightful and fun part of cooking is that it encourages sensory awareness. “Cooking provides sensory awareness experiences as they touch, taste, see, and hear foods” (Boals, 1992, p. 24). For infants and toddlers, cooking is a good opportunity for the teacher to plan these experiences. The children will be more involved the more their senses are involved (Davis & Keller, 2009). Young children cannot help but learn about the world around them through their senses. When children are cooking they look at different kinds of food, feel the textures of the food with both their hands and tongue. Children listen to the sounds of cooking and smell the aromas around them (Nielsen, 2006). This is a good time to describe what is happening, what the children’s senses are doing, and asking questions about what is happening.

I am sure it is strange to think of infants and toddlers as scientists. They are constantly learning about the world around them and are biologically prepared to be scientists. Science is highly engaging for children this age (French, 2004). Young children cannot help but be curious about their surroundings and how the world works. Cooking naturally engages children in science. Using their five senses, infants and toddlers acquire skills to make them natural scientists. Young infants become cooking participants by

observing the smells and sights and sounds of cooking and responding to them. An infant sitting in a high chair or bouncy seat near where cooking takes place can be part of the activity. As infants become more mobile they can squish a bag of muffin batter to help mix it up, squash bananas for bread, or dip fruit into yogurt to eat for snack. These activities are perfect for strengthening small motor development and for improving motor skills, and for encouraging autonomy. Infants are able to do much more observing and sensory exploration when they are encouraged to be a part of the learning activity.

Toddlers can observe physical changes to ingredients and think about answers to questions an educator could ask. They can take a more active role by scrambling eggs, spreading butter on toast, and stirring ingredients in a bowl. An educator can also start asking toddlers questions about their experiences that will extend their thinking (Dombro et al., 1999). Educators can ask questions such as “What did we do to the eggs?” or “What happened to the ingredients we mixed up?”

Math and Cooking

Math is another important component in cooking as well. Numerous opportunities exist to incorporate math with cooking. For example, when preparing a snack, the educator could help children count out how many crackers each child has no matter what age the child might be. Comparing big and small and how heavy or light an object or ingredient can also be a good way to incorporate math with cooking. Even using fractions and measuring cups is appropriate. Sequencing also is relevant by having recipe cards made up for the children to access. Steps outlining how to make mini pizzas or muffins can help support children's learning (Davis & Keller, 2009). Recipe cards with words and pictures could be part of the cooking activity, especially when the recipe will be used numerous times.

Early experiences in mathematics can provide a base for more formal investigations later on (DeVries et al., 2002). Starting in infancy, children can begin these early experiences with math through cooking. “Mathematics is a particular way of thinking and all children everywhere do it quite naturally” (Davis & Keller, 2009, p. 9). Taking something that is natural like math and incorporating it into a cooking activity will solidify the experience even more.

Language, Literacy and Cooking

Simply cooking without talking about it would be doing a disservice to the children. Giving children words and modeling language is important. Educators talk about what the children are doing and what is happening. With toddlers, a recipe with pictures is incredibly beneficial to learning about literacy. Children learn to focus by listening to and following directions as they cook, and they also learn to follow a set of procedures as well. (Boals, 1997). Cooking is also a good time to ask children questions about what they are doing. The most obvious use of literacy is using a book on which to base the cooking activity. This could include following a sequence of pictures and directions for a recipe the teacher and children will use in their cooking.

Social Studies and Cooking

Infants and toddlers are social creatures, and are learning from each other. As children gather in groups to cook, they observe and imitate each other and learn to take turns. Spending time together in this setting lends itself to easily learn from each other.

Cooking blends in well with culture. There are typically different cultures represented in classrooms that can be recognized and valued through cooking. This is also a good opportunity to get parents involved. Many parents will share a book or recipe that illustrates

their background. Parents are proud to share this information with their child's friends and teachers.

Health and Safety and Cooking

One of the biggest roadblocks that occurred when I was cooking with my toddlers was food allergies. Dealing with food allergies affected me because I was reluctant to do anything with food other than eat snacks and lunches with which I was familiar.

Unfortunately, it took me almost a year to get comfortable with cooking, but I learned about myself and about food. I realized that I let my fear thwart my creativity in cooking. Once I realized this, I decided that I needed to change my thinking, let go of my fear, and take the necessary precautions to be safe. I still planned for a good time, but anticipated what could go wrong. Reading labels became something I did without question when purchasing food for any cooking activity. I found labels would change from one time to the next so I read them each time before purchasing the food. I was able to investigate and find resources that were helpful in finding recipes and ways to educate other people about food allergies.

Educating others who also care for children with food allergies is imperative. It became a passion of mine to examine how safe everybody was around food, especially when we prepared it.

When an educator mixes and measures with infants and toddlers, taking necessary health and safety precautions are a must. Whether you have a special center devoted to cooking or not, it belongs in a messy area. Using the appropriate tools and ingredients cannot be overlooked. It is essential to have clean hands, a clean tabletop, fresh ingredients, and measuring and mixing tools (Nielsen, 2006). Children should be able to use utensils they can explore and use on their own, but using plastic, rubber, and nonbreakable tools are best. This

way cooking can be more manageable, but special items that can pose some danger should be carefully supervised and stored out of reach until use (Dombro et al., 1999). Items such as blenders and skillets can be used with adult supervision, but should be put out of children's reach when not in use.

An important aspect of being healthy and safe when a child cooks is hand washing. Hand washing is the easiest way to prevent germs from spreading. Luckily, hand washing is popular with young children. Not only is it a self-help skill, it is a sensory activity when children are using the water and soap (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2007). Establishing a routine where hand washing is the first thing children do before cooking, or any activity that involves food, is good practice.

Hand washing is a step that cannot be left out. "Hand washing is the best way to keep infections from spreading" (Gonzalez-Mena & Eyer, 2007, p. 258). It is important to wash hands before and after cooking. Sometimes hand washing occurs several times over the course of an activity, especially when children cough or sneeze in their hands. Often children enjoy putting their hands on the food then in their mouth. A trip to the sink would be necessary in order to wash hands again. Hand washing should be a natural step that occurs when cooking.

Guidelines

In order to be prepared better and to have some support, I have developed a list of guidelines that will be beneficial to consider before delving into cooking. I also believe the following guidelines are needed to achieve optimum learning results by teachers and childcare workers.

1. It is helpful to learn the literature concerning cooking with young children in a classroom setting.

There are several resources that outline specifics of an actual cooking center. A good example is *Teaching Young Children: A Guide to Planning Your Curriculum, Teaching Through Learning Centers, and Just About Everything Else* by Dianne Miller Nielsen. There is value in reading and reviewing this information in order to find out what works best for your setting. Every setting is different and whether you are a novice or not when it comes to cooking, reading more about this topic can be beneficial.

2. Having a mentor to give you support and advice in including cooking in the early childhood classroom could be beneficial.

In this way, you might become more confident in your own abilities after hearing about another person's success in this area. You would also have someone to gather information from and to share ideas.

3. Determine how cooking can be used by you based on the resources you have available.

You may not be able to do everything at once and being comfortable with cooking may take some time. If you can find a way to start out small by involving children in cooking, I believe you will be surprised and pleased with the results.

4. Children will learn the need for hand washing as a necessary part of cooking and food handling.

In order for children to be safe and healthy, this guideline cannot be overlooked. The best scenario is to have sinks that are at the children's level in order to do hand washing on their own. Infants will need help. Children should be using dispenser soap and paper towels.

It is also important to make sure children do not touch faucets or trash receptacles after washing (Gonzales-Mena & Eyer, 2007). Maintaining a safe environment where children cook is essential.

5. Determine how you will cook with children that have food allergies.

Most educators will likely encounter children with an allergy to food. This should not stop you from cooking, but you do have to take precautions. Planning will take more time, especially when you search for recipes. One of the most important parts of dealing with food allergies is communication and involvement of parents. Two helpful resources by Linda Marienhoff Coss are *How to Manage Your Child's Life-Threatening Food Allergies: Practical Tips for Everyday Life* and *What's to Eat? The Milk-Free, Egg-Free, Nut-Free Food Allergy Cookbook*.

Conclusion

As I reflect on my past experiences with cooking and ponder the future doing these culinary expeditions, I realize how much I have grown and how much more I can do and learn. Cooking is entirely possible in an infant and toddler classroom. I look forward to challenging myself in the future and think about what cooking looks like in other age groups. As children get older they will be able to do even more thinking and constructing on their own.

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CHAPTER 4

Conclusions and Recommendations

After spending time researching and writing this article, it is important to take some time to reflect and think about the processes I have gone through and what conclusions and recommendations I have developed about cooking with young children. I have learned a great deal more than I anticipated, and I have a much better grasp on my future cooking with young children.

Conclusions

I am excited about the research I found about cooking, because most of it already blended into my beliefs and practices. It also gave me a new sense of direction with cooking. I feel more invigorated with this topic and believe I can do much more with cooking than before. The benefits cooking provides to young children are expansive. Being able to integrate math, science, social studies, literacy, and health into one center or activity that is enjoyable for young children is such a good way to learn.

Identify and Synthesize Insights about Topic and Writing

The topic of cooking with young children has become even more valuable to me. I already have experience cooking, but going through more research and literature on young children and on cooking, I became more influenced and motivated to do more in this important area of early childhood curriculum. My personal and professional philosophy matches with what children experience in cooking. Children can get messy and enjoy cooking as a sensory activity. Children are managing many skills at once while cooking, and they do not even realize it. Cooking is fun, but it is also a good learning experience.

Recommendations

Cooking with young children can be a daunting task, especially when an educator is unsure of how to begin or how capable the children are. It is easy to underestimate your own abilities as well as the abilities of the children. My biggest recommendation is to involve young children. I believe very young children, infants, can begin the cooking process. Planning for cooking in the early childhood curriculum is important. Starting out small might be beneficial and gradually make your way up to doing more with cooking. A cooking center might not be appropriate in an infant classroom, but a mini-center could be perfect. Being prepared with the cooking activity will make for a much smoother process and will help the children be that much more successful. Also, having someone to mentor you or help you along the way could be encouraging, especially when you are starting out or trying something new. One of the most important recommendations in cooking is the safety factor. Kitchen gadgets cannot go unsupervised, but neither can the selection of food. Making sure food is healthy promotes a good sense of nutrition. Children with food allergies should be kept safe at all times, but not exempt from cooking.

Future Writing/Research

This article is going to be submitted to *The Voice* for possible publication (see Appendix B). This will be my first attempt at publishing an article, and I am excited about the opportunity to see my work in a national publication. I believe this will give me confidence in my writing abilities, and I hope others would be inspired to cook with young children.

Writing this article has inspired me in many ways and was a way to reflect on my current practices. Although I enjoy cooking with young children, I know I could do better. I

am still interested in food allergies. My first experience with a child in my classroom with severe food allergies was very scary because I was worried about her health every minute of the day. Since then I have had several children with allergies, and realized that food allergies are not going away. In fact, it seems that many children have them now more than ever and I am curious as to why this is true. I would also like to do more research on cooking centers and their organization. I have found some good resources already, but would like to synthesize what I have found and decide what would work best for my classroom.

Educational Practices of Self and Others

Since I know I could do better at cooking with the children in my care, I am thinking I could include my own personal experiences in cooking by doing a blog or a journal. I am hoping to keep track of my progress by doing either one of these. I believe this would make me more accountable, and it would be a great way to reflect on my own teaching. I take time to reflect on my teaching, but not in an authentic way such as this. After teaching for the last eight years, I believe this would be invigorating, useful, and meaningful. In the past, our center has done some presentations on cooking with young children and it has been successful. This is an area of interest, especially to the undergraduate students that go to the University of Northern Iowa. Giving a presentation to pre-service teachers would be ideal.

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APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

The Voice Submission Guidelines

National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers
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Dear Colleague,

A journal is now sponsored by the National Coalition of Campus Children's Centers. The intended audience for *The Voice: The Journal for Campus Children's Centers* is teachers, directors, faculty members and administrators of campus children's programs.

The Voice: The Journal for Campus Children's Centers seeks to advance the field of early childhood care and education by providing an opportunity for scholars and practitioners to integrate theory and research findings with teaching and daily practice. It is designed to provide its audience with up-to-date information regarding the application of child development, early childhood education, family support, and teacher education principles and concepts to campus settings.

The Voice: The Journal for Campus Children's Centers is published 3 times yearly, distributed to members online on the Member's Only page of the NCCCC Website (www.campuschildren.org).

The submission deadlines are as follows:

Spring Journal March 31st
 Summer Journal May 15th
 Winter Journal October 1st

Material intended for publication should be addressed to Candice York, Editor; University of Northern Iowa Child Development Center, 1901 Campus Street, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614-0611. Electronic submissions are encouraged and should be sent to candice.york@uni.edu. *Documents should be approximately 2000 words in APA style. Pertinent tables, illustrations and photographs may be included. A brief biographical sketch of the author must also be attached.*

Please consider submitting any materials that you think would benefit our members. We look forward to receiving your submissions, and would be happy to assist you with any questions you may have.

Sincerely,

Lisa A. Orsborn
 NCCCC Program Coordinator

APPENDIX B

Letter to the Editor of *The Voice*

113 Parkgate Road
Cedar Falls, IA 50613

July 9, 2009

Ms. Candice York, Editor
University of Northern Iowa Child Development Center
1901 Campus Street
Cedar Falls, IA 50614-0611

Dear Ms. Candice York:

Please accept my manuscript, "Cooking: Mixing and Measuring with Young Children." This article was written from an educator's perspective on managing cooking in the classroom with very young children. I believe infants and toddlers are capable of cooking and that educators of young children can include cooking in their curriculum.

Since cooking is a multisensory, hands-on activity, I believe that many young children find this engaging and fun. Cooking is highly interesting and children learn so many different things at once. I enjoy cooking in my own classroom and this article gave me an opportunity to give others an insight into cooking in the early childhood field. I also found ways I can improve upon my own practices through the research and literature I discovered on this topic.

The National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers (NCCCC) appeals to me personally as both a past member, a past presenter, and past conference attendee. I am employed at a campus-based center and finding an organization with similar ideas and issues I am familiar with is incredible. I have enjoyed past publications of *The Voice* and would be honored to have my article in your publication.

Sincerely,

Aimee M. Klostermann

Enclosures